

**STATEMENT OF MICHAEL SOUKUP, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, NATURAL RESOURCE STEWARDSHIP AND SCIENCE, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SENATE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS OF THE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES, CONCERNING S. 242, TO ESTABLISH 4 MEMORIALS TO THE SPACE SHUTTLE *COLUMBIA* IN THE STATE OF TEXAS.**

**APRIL 28, 2005**

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Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to present the Department of the Interior's views on S. 242, a bill to establish 4 memorials to the space shuttle *Columbia* in the State of Texas.

The Department does not support S. 242, unless amended to authorize a study to determine the most appropriate and effective way to establish a memorial to honor the brave men and women on the crew of the *Columbia*. We believe it is critical that National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the crew's family members, and others intimately involved in the shuttle mission, disaster, and recovery be part of a process to determine what is most appropriate. A study would provide this opportunity by including consultation with other agencies and organizations, including NASA, to determine what other commemorative efforts have been undertaken to memorialize the space shuttle *Columbia* as well as taking into account the wishes and desires of the crew's families regarding how they might like their loved ones remembered. A study also would look at a variety of alternatives that could include National Park Service (NPS) management or could focus on administering the site through State or local governments or private organizations.

Because a study can provide these important benefits, a suitability and feasibility study typically is conducted prior to designation of a new unit of the National Park System. Indeed, Congress established in the National Parks Omnibus Management Act of 1998 (P.L. 105-391) a process for authorizing studies before the designation of new units. Studies of this type typically take approximately three years to complete after funds are made available. We currently have 30 other similar studies in progress, and we hope to complete and transmit 15 to Congress by the end of calendar year 2005. We believe that available funding should be first directed toward completing previously authorized studies.

S. 242 would establish units of the National Park System without a study first determining whether the proposed units would be suitable and feasible additions to the National Park System or whether management by the NPS would be the most effective and efficient form of commemoration. S. 242 would establish four units of the National Park System in the Texas cities of Nacogdoches, Hemphill, Lufkin and San Augustine. Large amounts of debris from the *Columbia* were found on each of the four parcels specified in the bill, a combination of public and private land, and the Lufkin civic center served as NASA's command center for retrieval efforts. The legislation specifies that the memorials would be administered by the Secretary of the Interior (Secretary) and authorizes the Secretary to recommend additional sites in Texas for establishment of memorials to *Columbia*.

*Columbia*, the first space shuttle to orbit the earth, was NASA's oldest shuttle. On the morning of February 1, 2003, after a three-week mission devoted to scientific and medical experiments, the *Columbia* began its return to earth. As re-entry into the earth's atmosphere

continued over the Pacific, problems were noticed by NASA, contact with the shuttle was lost, and it began to break apart. Debris from the shuttle was observed from California to Louisiana, however the remains of the seven astronauts and the most significant parts of the shuttle were found in several communities across Texas. Soon after the crash, an independent accident investigation board was established and the first volume of the board's findings was issued in August 2003, identifying the factors that led to the shuttle disaster and making recommendations for future actions.

Many memorials and remembrances have been established in honor of *Columbia's* crew, including a memorial at Arlington Cemetery and on Devon Island in the Canadian High Arctic. Asteroids have been named for members of the crew, as has a highway in Washington and an elementary school in California. A memorial is planned at the U.S. Naval Academy for Commander William McCool on the cross-country course where he raced as a midshipman. On May 12, 2004, NASA dedicated its new "Altix" supercomputer to the memory of Kalpana "KC" Chawla, flight engineer and mission specialist on the *Columbia*.

If the Committee recommends immediate establishment of these new units of the National Park System, we suggest that the bill be clarified in several areas. The legislation is unclear whether the intent of the bill is to authorize the Secretary to manage a process that would produce a commemorative work – such as a plaque, statue, or other art that would be located on the properties identified in the legislation, or if the bill is authorizing the purchase of these properties to be developed as units of the National Park System that would then

require onsite management, development, and funding. The costs for establishing and managing these four areas as units of the National Park System would be difficult to determine at this time, but they could be expensive given the dispersed sites. These costs could best be estimated through the completion of a study.

Also, the bill does not clearly state a purpose for the memorials. In her floor speech introducing the legislation, Senator Hutchison spoke about memorializing the spirit and adventure of the space program and the men and women who accept the dangers and challenges of accomplishing NASA's mission. She also recognized the impact and efforts of four Texas communities and citizens that provided support and assisted with the collection and identification of debris and the remains of the crew. A clear and concise purpose would help guide the efforts to meet the legislation's intent.

NASA and other communities and organizations have already established a variety of memorials that recognize the tragedy as well as the enduring spirit of the crew and others associated with the final voyage of the *Columbia*. An NPS suitability and feasibility study would determine how, or if, this proposal would complement or add to those already established memorials.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my remarks and I would be happy to respond to any questions that you or other members of the subcommittee may have.